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In 1964, at a conference on computer applications to humanistic studies sponsored by IBM, a former professor of mine, Dr. John Ashmead, suggested that certain phonemes had semantic connotations. He dubbed this phenomenon "phonestheme" and applied it particularly to the 'Sn' phoneme as used in a group of William Faulkner's characters, the Snopes family. Dr. Ashmead pointed out that the 'Sn' phoneme occurs most commonly in words with negative connotations--snoop, snarl, sneer, snake, etc.--and that these connotations are carried over to the name Snopes and the characters who bear that name. Inspired by this idea, I reasoned that letters of the alphabet have shapes as well as sounds, and consequently it should be possible to speak in terms of "eidesthemes," semantic connotations associated with the shapes of letters. In fact, I made computer-assisted studies of Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Wallace Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C" to test this theory. I assumed that the steeple shape of capital A would be associated with the symbolism surrounding that letter in Hawthorne's novel. Consequently, I thought, the incidence of words beginning with A might well be higher in The Scarlet Letter than in Hawthorne's other works. That theory was disproved when my analysis showed that A-words in The Scarlet Letter did not exceed Hawthorne's average usage of such words in his short stories, but I still feel that the "eidestheme" idea has some merit. As applied to "The Comedian as the Letter C," a poem in which the central

character, named Crispin, is surrounded by a host of words containing the letter C, it seemed that the embracing, enfolding shape of the letter related directly to a central theme of the poem. Crispin embraces experience avidly, and Stevens speaks in the poem of curvatures of life and vision. As related to Snopes, the serpentine S shape, particularly as augmented by the fang-like N shape, reinforces the snaky connotation of the beginning phoneme and the hissing 'ps' at the end. It also interacts with a metaphor used by one of Faulkner's narrators to describe the Snopeses: "...This here seems to be a different kind of Snopes like a cottonmouth is a different kind of snake."[1]

The name Snopes, therefore, becomes a kind of common collective noun, or even a verb (The Hamlet, p. 162), connoting avaricious, unscrupulous, amoral inhumanity. Having no specific meaning anterior to its denotation of this group of characters, but infested with connotations arising from phonesthemic and eidesthemic linkages with unpleasant words, concepts, and images, the name Snopes becomes generic and meaningful, so that one can speak of Snopesism as a trait in persons and societies. Meanings accrete in the name by a kind of organic process: connotations--our linguistic heritage--lead us to expect certain meanings in the name, and our experience of the characters, as Faulkner gradually unfolds them, both fulfills and modifies our expectations.

To fully detail how our experience with each of the more than two dozen identified Snopeses modifies our understanding of Snopesism would be impossible in this paper. Not only does each, in his or her uniqueness, supply additional nuances, but the characters themselves even change from novel to novel and story to story, as Faulkner himself admitted.[2] Besides, the subject has been treated extensively

by various critics.[3] My focus is on how the given names of each member of the Snopes family contribute to our understanding of the Snopeses as a microcosm of fallen humanity, evoking from the reader emotional responses that range from disgust to pity and grudging admiration. An additional complexity to consider is that, although Faulkner, of course, is ultimately responsible for all the names, the fact that Snopes parents have given their children specific names is equally significant.

Let us begin with the earliest Snopes in the genealogical line, Abner Snopes, commonly known as Ab. We can quickly dismiss any comic associations with Al Capp's hill-billy character Li'l Abner, since he post-dates Faulkner's creation, although Ab is descended from the same Tennessee hill-folk that so many of Faulkner's characters are. We can also dismiss any association with Abner, the captain of Saul's forces in 1 and 2 Samuel, since Ab shows little of Abner's fortitude and faithfulness. Ab Snopes is seen in The Unvanquished, at the time of the Civil War, as a horse-thief and mule-trader, an agent of Granny Millard, Col. John Sartoris' mother-in-law, in her attempt to secure sustenance for the poor people of her ravaged community by stealing Yankee horses and selling them back again. In that novel Ab is horse-whipped by Bayard Sartoris in revenge for the part played by Ab in getting Granny involved with Grumby, the criminal who killed her. Ab's character develops in other stories and is seen most fully in The Hamlet, the first novel in the Snopes trilogy, There he is known as a barn-burner who trades on this menace to get taken on as a share-cropper. As the first Snopes to enter Yoknapatawpha County and as the father of Flem, the ultimate Snopes, Ab is the progenitor, in a way, of Snopesism. This gives us one association with his name: Ab is not only the beginning of the alphabet but could

also be an abbreviated form of Abraham. In fact, in 1926 Faulkner started a story, soon abandoned but containing material found in his later work, entitled "Father Abraham."[4] The title, ironically taken from a Sherwood Anderson biography of Abraham Lincoln, actually refers to Flem Snopes, by whose means all the later Snopeses were insinuated into the Yoknapatawpha County communities of Frenchman's Bend and Jefferson. However, when Faulkner returned to the Snopes material he seems to have transferred the Abraham-role of father of the Snopes tribe to Ab, and named him accordingly. Obviously, any other parallels with Abraham or Lincoln are purely ironic, since the only God Ab serves is his own appetites, even though Ratliff, Faulkner's astute commentator in the trilogy, says of him that he is not naturally bad, just "soured" (The Hamlet, p. 29). Ratliff blames this souring on the whipping by Bayard, on Ab's being shot in the heel by Col. John Sartoris "for trying to steal his clay-bank riding stallion during the war" (The Hamlet, p. 16), and on Ab's unsuccessful attempt to outwit the notorious Pat Stamper in horse-trading (The Hamlet, pp. 29-47). As a result of these various wounds, Ab is left with a permanent limp, a totally antisocial attitude, and a fierce pride that takes revenge at petty injuries by burning the barns of his landlords. The pride and the limp suggest another association with Ab's name, that of Ahab. In many ways, Ab Snopes resembles both Melville's character Captain Ahab and his biblical namesake: he has turned away from goodness and humanity to follow false gods of pride and revenge, and the result is similarly destructive. Although we lose sight of Ab before his death, his behavior has loosed the disease of Snopesism on the world, just as Captain Ahab doomed his ship and its company.

Besides Flem, Ab has three other children: a boy named

Colonel Sartoris ("Sarty") and two daughters, Net and Lizzy. The daughters, whose names seem to be abbreviations of the fairly common names Annette and Elizabeth, need not detain us; they are pictured, in both shape and intelligence, as utterly bovine. Sarty, on the other hand, is more significant. He is the first of several Snopeses named after an eminent man, presumably partly out of hero-worship and partly in hope that he will emulate his namesake and rise in social position. Ironically, he does emulate an aspect of Col. Sartoris, his aristocratic sense of decency and fair play, and he consequently behaves in a very un-Snopes-like way. In the story "Barn Burning," Sarty, at age ten, refuses to bear witness against his father in court on the charge of barn-burning, and so Ab is acquitted. When Ab determines to burn a second barn, however, Sarty begs him not to, and then runs to warn the barn's owner. He is unsuccessful on both counts, and his adherence to honor above the claims of kinship leads him to run away, whereupon he disappears from the Snopes chronicle and is mentioned in The Hamlet only as a memory. Sarty is proof that not every character who bears the name of Snopes is unscrupulous, and yet his acquiescence in the lie of Ab's innocence and his inability to prevent his father's destructiveness put him among fallen humanity. The Col. Sartoris after whom he is named is almost as shrewd and grasping as a Snopes, and the values of social ethics are not enough to stamp out Snopesism.

Snopesism is most clearly defined and exemplified in Ab's oldest son, Flem. Having used his father's fire-bug threat to get his start as a clerk in Will Varner's store, Flem Snopes steadily climbs the socio-economic ladder from poor dirt-farmer to president of the bank founded by Col. John Sartoris in Jefferson. In this ascent Flem uses every

means available: honest industry when that will serve, cheating and stealing from anyone, even his own kin, when it won't. He takes advantage of Eula Varner's pregnancy by another man to marry her and give the child a name in exchange for a handsome settlement from her father. Impotent himself, he takes advantage of Eula again by parlaying her affair with Major de Spain into further prosperity for himself. Immune to the demands of kinship, he turns against his own family when their behavior threatens his quest for security. Although several people try to oppose him in the name of humanity and morality, he outwits them all. Finally, however, his chickens come home to roost and, having lost his wife through suicide and having found his achievements hollow, he is killed by his cousin whom he had been instrumental in keeping in jail.

Flem's most terrifying and inhuman aspect is the relentless impassivity with which he chews his way through people's money and self-respect. This impassivity is symbolized in his name and appearance: "He spat. He had a broad flat face. His eyes were the color of stagnant water. He was soft in appearance..." (The Hamlet, p. 22)--

> a thick squat soft man of no establishable age between twenty and thirty, with a broad still face containing a tight seam of mouth stained slightly at the corners with tobacco,...and projecting from among the other features in startling and sudden paradox, a tiny predatory nose like the beak of a small hawk. It was as though the original nose had been left off by the original designer or craftsman and the unfinished job taken over by someone of a radically different school or perhaps by some viciously maniacal humorist or perhaps by one who had had only time to clap into the center of the face a frantic and desperate warning.(The Hamlet, pp. 51-52).

Adding to this bland appearance is his stillness of manner; he never raises his voice nor wastes a motion, almost his only movement being the steady, constant grinding of his jaws as he chews tobacco, punctuated now and then by an unconcerned spit. In appearance, manner, and habit of chewing he is the epitome of the phlegmatic type, the least appetizing of the four humours.

Flem is responsible for bringing the lesser Snopeses to Yoknapatawpha County, installing them in places beneath him as he vacates upward, and it is Flem against whom all these are to be measured. Although attempts have been made to draw up a Snopes genealogy, "they none of them seemed to bear any specific kinship to one another; they were just Snopeses, like colonies of rats or termites are just rats and termites" (The Town, p. 40). The first of these other Snopeses we meet, although he wears the Snopes look of low cunning and has a name, Eck (short for Eckrum), that reminds us of Flem, is, ironically, not a true Snopes at all. Flem installs him in Frenchman's Bend as a blacksmith and later moves him to Jefferson to take over the restaurant job that he moves upward from, but not only is Eck incompetent at everything he attempts, he also believes in the "incredible and innocent assumption that all people practise courage and honesty for the simple reason that if they didn't everybody would be frightened and confused" (The Town, p. 33). In contrast to Flem's lack of concern for anyone, even his own kin, Eck suffered a broken neck trying to save a Negro in a lumbermill accident (The Town, p. 32). Consequently, he was "indubitably and indefensibly not a Snopes:...whose mother...must have, as the old bucolic poet said, cast a leglin girth...before she married whatever Snopes was Eck's titular father"(The Town, p. 31).

Fired from the restaurant by Flem for criticizing the food, Eck is given a night watchman job by Will Varner and the Masons so that the next Snopes in line will move out of Frenchman's Bend.

Eck has several children, only two of whom are named in the novels, the boys Wallstreet Panic (Wall for short) and Admiral Dewey. The naming of the first of these throws considerable light on the Snopeses: unable to understand how a ten-year-old boy could be named after an event that had happened only a year or two ago, Ratliff asks Eck if he has changed Wall's name. Eck answers, "It wasn't changed. He never had no name to speak of until last year. I left him with his grandma after my first wife died, while I was getting settled down; I was just sixteen then. She called him after his grandpa, but he never had no actual name. Then last year after I got settled down and sent for him, I thought maybe he better have a name. I. O. [a cousin] read about that one in the paper. He figured if we named him Wallstreet Panic it might make him get rich like the folks that run that Wallstreet panic" (The Hamlet, p. 266). Although we aren't told, Admiral Dewey Snopes, six years younger than his brother Wall, must have gotten his name by a similar process. The ritual magic apparently works to some extent. Not only does Wallstreet Panic seem to bear a charmed life--he emerges unscathed from the midst of a stampede of wild horses that Ratliff likens to a herd of tigers--but he also becomes wealthy. By sheer honest effort, repudiating and attempting to live down the Snopes name and reputation, he establishes a chain of self-service grocery stores. His brother Admiral Dewey, also a non-Snopes from a non-Snopes, assists him and prospers along with him. Both of these characters are examples to prove that not only is the Snopes name not entirely synonymous with amoral avarice

(Snopeses aren't devils, merely fallen human beings) but also it is possible to redeem both individual Snopeses and the Snopes name through moral effort.

I. O. Snopes, who comes to Frenchman's Bend at the same time as Eck and follows him on to Jefferson, is, however, pure Snopes. We never learn more of his name than the cryptic though mercantile initials I. O. (one can't help adding the U.), but we learn much about his character. His primary trait is an inexhaustible supply of trite maxims and old saws, uttered incessantly without regard to sense or occasion. This windiness suits him admirably, according to Ratliff, for the position of schoolmaster in Frenchman's Bend, in which his cousin Flem installs him, and the demands of that position even make him spend a couple of dollars to preserve the Snopes name, which "has done held its head up too long in this country to have no such reproaches against it like stock-diddling" (The Hamlet, p. 201). However, he is perfectly willing to cheat and connive almost as much as Flem, and he bears the added stigma of having married a second wife without having bothered to divorce the first.

As might be expected, this bigamist had numerous progeny, all as bad as he. Beginning with the youngest, about whom we learn least, there are his five sons by his second wife: St. Elmo, the twins Vardaman and Bilbo, Doris (a boy), and Clarence Egglestone. St. Elmo is only seen as a little boy, greedily robbing the candy counter in Varner's store, and compared by Jody Varner with a rat or goat: "First thing I know, he'll graze on back and work through that lace leather and them hame-strings and lap-links and ring-bolts and eat me and you and him all three clean out the back door" (The Hamlet, p. 318). The image of voracious, rat-like eating is characteristic of Snopesism in general. St. Elmo Snopes could possibly have gotten his name from the patron saint of mariners, St. Erasmus (corrupted to Elmo), the martyr who was killed in 303 A.D. by Diocletian's agents, allegedly

by having his intestines wound out of his body on a windlass (perhaps an ironic reference to the Snopeses' greediness). St. Elmo's fire, the electric discharges at the tips of masts and spars just before a storm, is supposed to be a sign that the saint has taken the ship under his protection.[5] The saint's symbol is a windlass, a kind of pulley for hoisting things like anchors, perhaps appropriate to Snopes ambition. Another saint sometimes called St. Elmo because of his work among Spanish sailors is St. Peter Gonzalez (1190-1246), who was confessor and chaplain to King Ferdinand of Castile and helped to foster crusades against the Moors.[6] An unlikely association with Snopes, unless a hint of color prejudice is implied. More likely, given I. O. Snopes's unending supply of clichéd proverbs, is a link with the St. Elmo Hotel, one of the oldest and most elegant at Chatauqua, the home of speeches, both secular and religious. A still more likely and even more ironic source for the name, however, is from the title of Augusta Jane Evans's extremely popular novel St. Elmo, published in 1867. The title character of this sentimental tale is a dissipated young man, St. Elmo Murray, who reforms with the help of the good and tender woman Edna Earl, whom he eventually marries. After the publication of this novel, the names St. Elmo, Elmo, and Elmer gained new popularity.[7] We know that I. O. Snopes reads, although his glasses have no lenses (The Hamlet, p. 200), and this is exactly the kind of story that would stir this shallow, social-climbing sentimentalist. In this case, the name tells us more about the namer, I. O., than about the boy.

The twins Vardaman and Bilbo express their share in Snopes meanness, as far as we know, only by tormenting their "Grampaw," old Ab, with cries that there are boys in his melon patch and then laughing while he chases the

non-existent intruders (The Town, pp. 129-131). The source of their names is obvious. James K. Vardaman was Governor of Mississippi 1904-1908 and Senator 1913-1919; Theodore G. Bilbo was Governor of Mississippi 1916-1920 and a power in the state both before and after that time. Both of these men appealed primarily to the small-time farmer or "redneck," advocating programs that would distribute representation and taxation more equitably and opposing the bankers and railroad interests. Their election represented a change in Mississippi politics, resulting from a shift from a system of Democratic conventions that produced leaders from a small clique to open primaries that encouraged appeals to the mass of voters. Since they were seen as champions of the little man, it is easy to see why social-climbing peasants like the Snopeses would name children after them. Faulkner seems also to have been interpolating some mild political satire by making Vardaman and Bilbo into Snopes twins. The two were seen, especially by their enemies, as political twins. Both were demagogues, both (especially Bilbo) were associated with scandals, and Vardaman especially preached race hatred. (He once said that the Declaration of Independence did not apply to "wild animals and niggers.")[8] To a liberal on the black question, such as Faulkner,[9] this would have been odious, although in truth both Vardaman and Bilbo accomplished significant reforms, especially in the areas of taxation and improvement of the penal and mental health systems. (An irony is that Vardaman Bundren, a character in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, winds up in one of the mental hospitals that Governor Vardaman founded.)

Doris Snopes, the boy with the girl's name, "has the mentality of a child and the moral principles of a wolverine."[10] He is almost burned at the stake for teasing some wild Snopes children. His name, from Greek words meaning either "gift" or "sacrificial knife," and normally feminine, is therefore

multiply ironic. His brother, Clarence Egglestone, who instigates the teasing, is the politician among the Snopeses. When he was constable of Frenchman's Bend, his tendency to enforce the law with the butt of a gun led Will Varner to get him elected to the state legislature to get him out of the way. Pure demagogue after the pattern of Vardaman, Bilbo, and Huey Long, Clarence had a good shot at becoming Governor but he wanted the Senate. In fact, he was well on his way until Ratliff stopped him with the Rabelaisian trick of sprinkling his trousers with odor of female dog, which attracted all the male dogs in the county to wet on him. Sheer embarrassment and ridicule ruined him politically, but he was still able to make money by pimping in Memphis. Clarence gets his first name from the English Duchy (the creation of a new Duke of Clarence in 1890 stimulated interest in the name), possibly with the same intention that Twain had in giving the name to an effete, unheroic character in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.[11] His middle name, however, is more significant. In the late 1800's General Beroth B. ("Buzzard") Eggleston was prominent in Mississippi politics immediately after the Civil War and during the Reconstruction period. As a Northern Carpetbagger--he was a native of New York and had fought in a Federal regiment from Ohio--who presided over the "Black and Tan" Convention of 1868 that passed many proposals aimed at replacing white political officers with black, Eggleston earned for himself the undying hatred of white Mississippians.[12] Again Faulkner is satirizing political venality.

I. O. Snopes's oldest boy, Montgomery Ward Snopes, is the most vicious of the lot. Having evaded the draft by artificially inducing an irregular heart beat, Monty went to France with the Y. M. C. A., where he skimmed profits,

acted as a pimp, and came back to Jefferson with a batch of dirty pictures with which he went into business operating a peep show. When the scandal became so egregious that it reflected on Flem Snopes's reputation, Flem helped to set him up for arrest. But Flem also had other fish to fry, so he planted moonshine on the premises so that Montgomery Ward would get sent to the state prison at Parchman rather than the federal prison in Atlanta. This figured into Flem's plans as a way of getting Monty access to the most dangerous Snopes, Mink, already in jail on a murder conviction, in order to persuade Mink to attempt an escape, doomed to fail and to add twenty more years to his sentence. Flem has good reason to fear Mink, who has vowed revenge when Flem failed to help him at his trial and who finally carries out the threat with a cheap pistol. Like his cousin Watkins Products Snopes, the fastidious carpenter who renovates Flem's mansion, Montgomery Ward has a name that signifies the mercantile mentality of the Snopes family. It should also be observed that these names are of retail merchandising outlets that cater specifically to the lower class mass market, about where Snopes tastes and aspirations would lie.

Somehow related to these other Snopeses are Wesley Snopes and his two sons Byron and Virgil. Wesley, obviously named after the religious leader John Wesley, is described as follows:

> This was the actual Snopes schoolmaster. No: he looked like a schoolmaster. No: he looked like John Brown with an ineradicable and unhidable flaw: a tall gaunt man in a soiled frock coat and string tie and a wide politician's hat [probably an allusion to Governor Vardaman's usual attire], with cold furious eyes and the long chin of a talker: not that verbal diarrhea of his cousin [I. O.] ...but

> a kind of unerring gift for a base and evil ratiocination in argument, and for correctly reading the people with whom he dealt: a demagogue's capacity for using people to serve his own appetites, all clouded over with a veneer of culture and religion; the very names of his two sons, Byron and Virgil, were not only instances but warnings (The Town, pp. 40-41).

His nephew Montgomery Ward imagines him "leading a hymn with one hand and fumbling the skirt of an eleven-year-old infant with the other" (The Mansion, p. 83). Eventually Wesley was caught with a fourteen-year-old girl by a "posse of enraged fathers" and "tarred and feathered" out of the country (The Town, p. 41).

Virgil Snopes is basically a comic character. Sent by his cousin Clarence to Memphis, he takes up residence in a brothel under the naive impression that it is a respectable boarding house unaccountably inhabited by a large number of attractive women. Upon having his eyes opened, he learns his real talent, despite the chaste classicism of his name, to be the ability to sexually satisfy two or three women in succession. His cousin Clarence earns money by betting on his stamina. Sex and money are also the main weaknesses of his appropriately named brother. Byron Snopes becomes bookkeeper in the Sartoris bank in Jefferson. He pays a little boy to deliver his obscene letters to Narcissa Benbow (later the wife of young Bayard Sartoris), who is far beyond his social class. She never learns the author, even after he sneaks into her home to retrieve the letters, lie for an impassioned moment on her bed, and steal one of her undergarments, but the letters stop after he steals money from the bank and absconds to Mexico. There he apparently takes up with an Apache squaw, for, some years later, four wild, half-Apache, nameless children arrive in Jefferson on the train with a tag addressing them C. O. D. to Flem Snopes from Byron Snopes. These silent children

(they can't talk) are so ferocious and terrifying that even Flem can't handle them. Cousin Clarence couples them in leashes and uses them like hunting dogs, but after they try to burn Doris Snopes at the stake, Flem puts them back on the train and pays their fare one-way back to Mexico. Lord Byron, perhaps deservedly, had a reputation for profligate sensuality, but, like everything else they touch, Snopeses have perverted Byronism into something ugly and hurtful.

Another classically named Snopes, Orestes Snopes, is potentially murderous but ultimately comic. After Res moves into the old Compson place, owned by Flem, he annoys his neighbor Meadowfill by allowing his hogs onto Meadowfill's property. The neighbor responds by filling the hogs with buckshot. The feud heats up over a property sale, and finally Res sets up a booby trap so that when Meadowfill opens his window to shoot a hog he is himself peppered with buckshot. Enraged, Meadowfill is ready to use his .22 rifle, as Res hopes because then he could invoke the ordinance against shooting guns inside the town limits and blackmail Meadowfill into selling his property. Gavin Stevens, however, prevents further shooting and "sells" the booby trap to Res in exchange for his giving the disputed land to Meadowfill's daughter. Since Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, is a classic exemplum of revenge, there is a certain appropriateness in the name of this Snopes, but, like everything associated with the Snopes family, the revenge motif is trivialized and degraded into a petty squabble over hogs and property leases.

Another Snopes with a fancy name is Launcelot Snopes, alias Lump. His mother, a schoolteacher before her marriage, with "a belief that there was honor and pride and salvation and hope too to be found for man's example between the pages of books, ...bore one child and named it Launcelot, flinging this quenchless defiance into the very jaws of the closing trap, and died. 'Launcelot!' Ratliff cried. ...

'Lump! Just think of his shame and horror when he got big enough to realise what his ma had done to his family's name and pride so that he even had to take Lump for folks to call him in place of it!'" (The Hamlet, p. 197). Again Faulkner makes use of heavy-handed irony; Launcelot Snopes, far from being the "chevalier sans peur et sans reproche" of his namesake, is perhaps the most disgusting member of the family. Not only does he perjure himself in court to protect his cousin Flem (who doesn't even bother to appear), but he takes advantage of his idiot cousin's aberrations to make money. The cousin, Isaac or Ike, is enamored of a cow and apparently engages in sexual intercourse with it (Faulkner is discreetly vague). Lump Snopes has opened a peep-hole in the barn and encourages the men of Frenchman's Bend to watch these performances. He is thus several degrees worse than even his pornographer cousin Montgomery Ward. Lump's greed is displayed also at the expense of another cousin. After Mink Snopes has murdered Houston in revenge for losing a dollar to him in court over a stray cow, Lump is astonished that Mink, who doesn't have even enough money to get out of the county, didn't rob the corpse. He forces Mink to take him to the hidden body to rob it, and as a result Mink is captured.

Lump's two victims are among the most interesting and least Snopes-like members of the family. Mink Snopes, the irascible little farmer, is poor but proud and determined. As already mentioned, he murders his wealthy neighbor over a single dollar, and when Flem fails to help him during the trial, and again engineers his aborted escape, he waits thirty-eight years, walks and hitchhikes many miles at the age of sixty-three, and works just long enough to buy a gun so he can kill Flem. If such patience, intensity, and single-minded energy had been expended on worthwhile goals,

Mink would be a hero. In fact, Faulkner's voices of reason in the trilogy, Ratliff and Gavin Stevens, voice a hear-felt eulogy when they find Mink dead, a eulogy more fitting for a dead warrior than for a vengeful killer. The name also implies some of the paradox: despite the great value of its fur, associated with elegance, grace, and wealth, the mink is a mean, vicious rodent, with the appetite of a rat and the temper of a wolverine. When Ratliff meets Mink Snopes for the second time and tries to recall his name, he thinks "fox? cat? oh yes mink" (The Hamlet, p. 89). The association of both fox and cat are appropriate, again, for just low-down, mean, untrustworthiness.

Finally, Isaac Snopes is both the most and the least Snopes-like of all. He is like Mink in his complete unconcern about money; both of them have the un-Snopes-like trait of literally throwing it away, whereas the other Snopeses will stoop to any low, devious device to gain it. But whereas for Mink Snopes, money is unimportant compared to the intensity of his hatreds, for Isaac money is unimportant both because, as an idiot, he doesn't know its true value, and because it can not substitute for his real love, that is, the cow. He is the only member of the family with any positive emotions; Faulkner describes his idyllic elopement with the cow in tender, glowing terms, much as he surrounds that other idiot, Benjy of The Sound and the Fury, with an aura of grace and the smell of trees. On the other hand, as an idiot, Ike is completely amoral and thinks nothing of stealing both cow and feed. He is also a kind of touchstone: other people's reactions to him reveal their moral worth. The Snopeses take advantage of him, but the humane characters, like Ratliff and Mrs. Littlejohn, seek to protect him. In a sense he is like the young Isaac of the Bible: innocent and loving, he tests the faithfulness of others. Like Faulkner's other

Isaac, Ike McCaslin, the protagonist of "The Bear," he is entirely in tune with his natural surroundings. But for Ike Snopes, this harmony results from the absence of ratiocination rather than from a conscious abnegation of self. His eyes "had opened upon, been vouchsafed a glimpse of, the Gorgon-face of that primal injustice which man was not intended to look at face to face and had been blasted empty and clean forever of any thought"(The Hamlet, p. 85). Ike Snopes also lacks a language; his vocabulary consists only of moans and of his name, which he renders "Ike H-mope." Unlike the other snaky Snopeses, it is as if Ike is trying to declare his humanity by sounding the initial H. But then he falls back into the unreasoning lethargy implied by the slang word "mope."

Looked at as a group, the Snopeses are certainly an unappetizing lot, but they are not an allegorical representation of absolute evil. Ab, the progenitor, contributed to the maintenance of people ravaged by warfare and earned young Ratliff's respect before he went sour. Flem's quest was simply for financial success and respectability, a goal we can sympathize with, although his methods were ruthless and devious. Mink had the fierce determination of a hero, and other members of the family were ineffectual and comic. At least two members of the family succeeded through sheer honest effort, and Ike, in his simple innocence, reminds us that the core of humanity is loving and gentle. What Faulkner has done with this family, then, is to illustrate how greed, unrestrained by either grace or moral effort, can warp the basic goodness of human nature into something ugly and destructive. Faulkner warns us that everything and everyone, no matter how noble and revered (like Virgil and Launcelot), no matter how brilliant and resolute (like Byron and Orestes), no matter how homespun and utilitarian (like Montgomery Ward and Watkins Products), no matter how apparently harmless and passive

(like Mink and Flem), can be corrupted by greed and can spread the rot of materialism. In a kind of twentieth-century danse macabre, instead of popes, kings, and peasants being led off to Hell by death, we here have all levels and types of humanity being joined by the common bond of mean ambitions, wrongfully attained, "for now were all transformed /Alike, to serpents all" (Paradise Lost, X, 519-520). At the same time, however, by the Dickensian comedy of the names, heavily laced with irony, Faulkner assures us that, despite Ratliff's vision of Flem supplanting the Devil as ruler of Hell (The Hamlet, pp. 149-153), the threat of the Snopeses is contained by a larger vision still. The comic vision offers a happy ending, the banishment of evil and the renewal of hope, guarded and sustained by active, humane morality. This is the vision implicit in Faulkner's Nobel Prize Address: "The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."[13]

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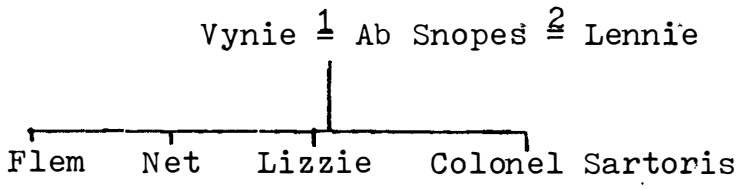
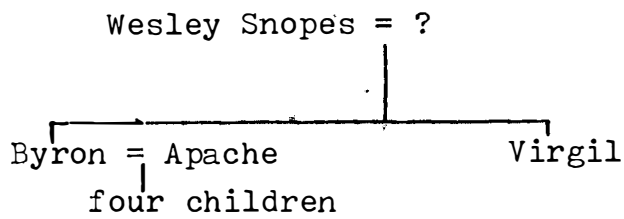
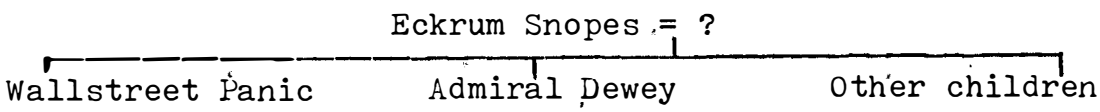
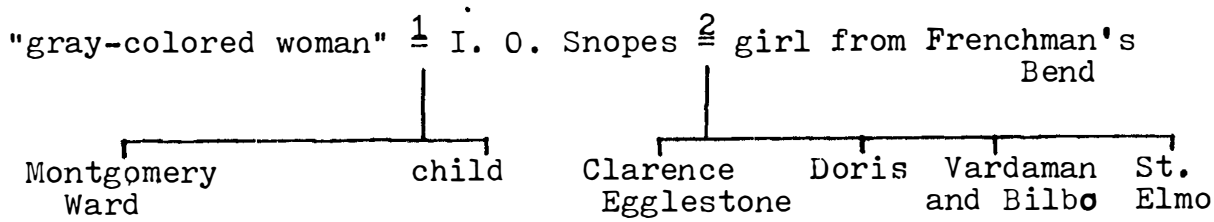
Appendix

SNOPES GENEALOGIES









Additional Snopeses: Isaac (Ike)
Launcelot (Lump)
Mink
Orestes (Res)
Watkins Products

NOTES

[1] Ratliff speaking of Mink Snopes in William Faulkner, The Hamlet, (New York: Random House [Vintage Books], 1956), p. 91. Further references to this work, as well as to The Town and The Mansion, also published by Vintage Books in 1957 and 1965 respectively, will be given parenthetically in the paper.

[2] Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-58, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 108.

[3] For example, Warren Beck, Man in Motion: Faulkner's Trilogy (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961) and James Gray Watson, The Snopes Dilemma: Faulkner's Trilogy (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1968).

[4] Joseph Blotner, Faulkner: A Biography (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 526-529.

[5] Donald Attwater, The Penguin Dictionary of Saints (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1965), s.v. St. Erasmus.

[6] Ibid.

[7] George R. Stewart, American Given Names (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), s.v. Elmer

[8] Albert D. Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks: Mississippi Politics, 1876-1925 (New York: Harper and Row, 1965, repr. 1951), p. 181.

[9] James W. Silver, Mississippi: The Closed Society (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964), pp. xi-xiv.

[10] Robert W. Kirk, Faulkner's People (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 193.

[11] Stewart, p. 84, s.v. Clarence

[12] James Wilford Garner, Reconstruction in Mississippi (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1964), pp. 187 ff.

[13] The Portable Faulkner (rev. ed.), ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1967), p. 724.